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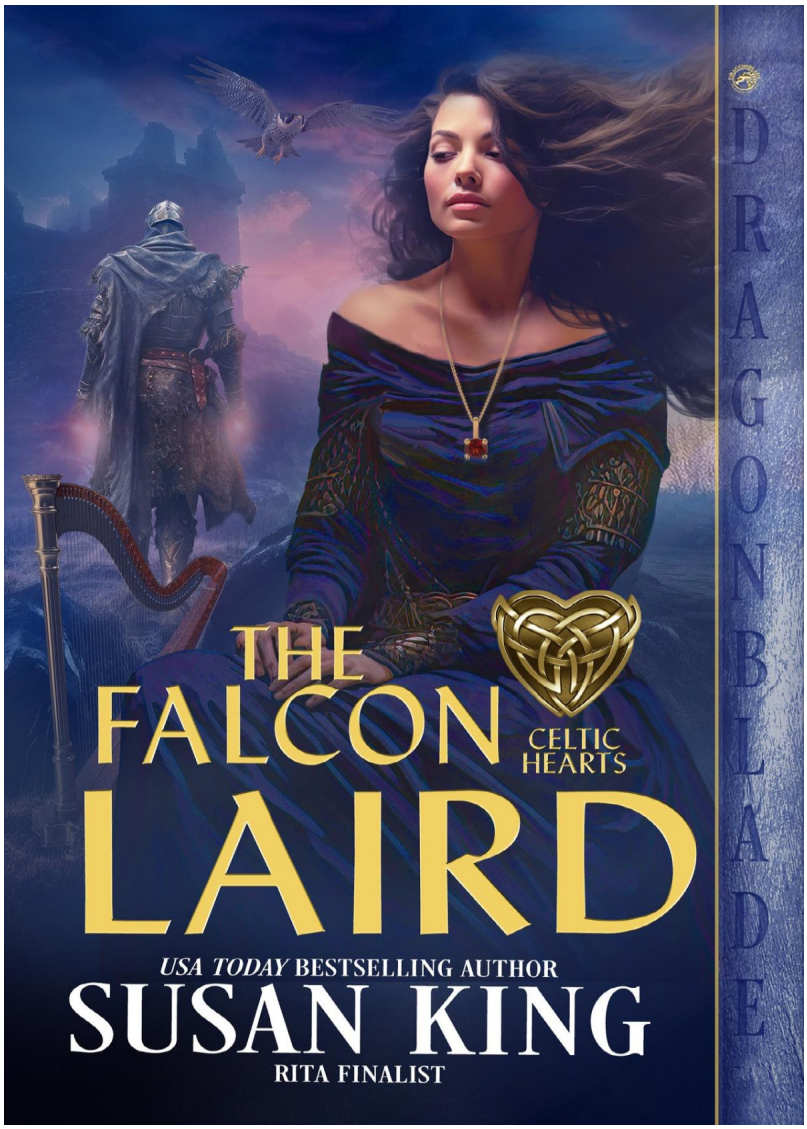

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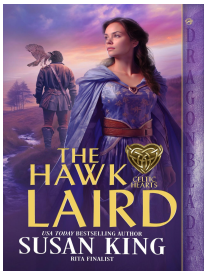

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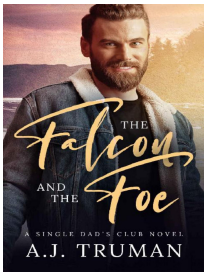

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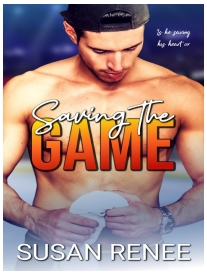

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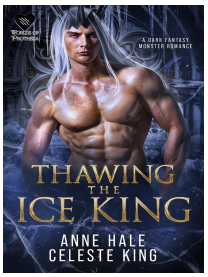

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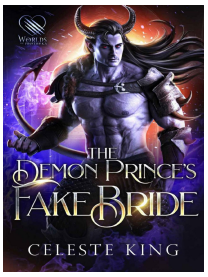

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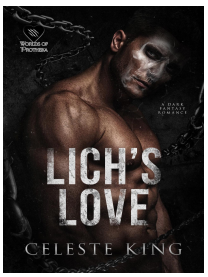

THE FALCON LAIRD

CELTIC HEARTS

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

SUSAN KING

RITA FINALIST

DRAGONBLADE

The Falcon Laird

Celtic Hearts, Book 2

Susan King

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Author's Note

About the Author

Preface

Long ago, storytellers recited tales by the fireside in the oral tradition for their audiences, making small changes in the narrative that changed those stories over time. Now traditional publishing casts a manuscript into a published form that makes it permanent in a sense. Yet every new edition gives the author a chance to update, tweak, and evolve the story.

I am happy to introduce to you *The Falcon Laird*, a revised edition of the industry-nominated novel previously published as *The Angel Knight*. This new Dragonblade edition gave me the opportunity to bring clarity and improvement to a story that I have always loved. I am a better writer now than I was then, and it was a joy to update the book and enhance the story in a way that I hope will please new readers as well as those familiar with the original.

The idea for the novel began when I read about the iron cages ordered by King Edward I of England in 1306 for two captive Scottish noblewomen; the women were held for years with little dignity or comfort. Appalled and fascinated, I wanted to write a story about a fictional woman captured with the others.

After burning her Scottish castle to prevent the English king from claiming the ancient gold hidden there, Lady Christian is captured and locked in an iron cage. Desperately ill, she sees an archangel—but he is just an English knight ordered to move her to a convent, take her castle, and find the gold. Sir Gavin Faulkener has secrets of his own, including a gift of healing that has brought him only tragedy. Yet the beautiful Scottish rebel mysteriously recovers in his care—and soon he discovers that her castle is a smoking ruin overrun by loyal Scots. While Gavin and Christian search for the treasure before a common enemy can find it, old secrets are exposed, unexpected love grows, and the deepest wounds begin to heal.

This will always be one of my favorite stories. I hope you love it too!

Prologue

Galloway, Scotland
Summer, 1306

She stood on a green hill at dawn and watched her home burn. Thick charcoal clouds darkened the sky and acrid smoke stung her eyes, but Lady Christian refused to allow tears to form. Glancing down at her fair-haired daughter, she gently squeezed her hand.

"*Màthair*," the child said. "Your *clàrsach*—"

"My harp is safe," Christian murmured in Gaelic. "I have hidden her away. As I will hide you, sweet girl." She tightened her hold on the child's fingers. "The English shall have nothing of value from Kilglassie Castle, neither people nor contents."

She was the widow of an English knight, yet Lady Christian MacGillan had been declared a traitor and an outlaw by King Edward of England, who had dispossessed her of her Scottish lands. As if he had any claim to the land himself, she thought bitterly. Now her survival and her daughter's safety depended on eluding the English soldiers who sought them.

No turning back now that she had set the castle's interior ablaze. Setting torch to straw had taken all the courage she possessed—but she reminded herself that she had obeyed the orders of her king and cousin, Robert Bruce. She had no choice.

Her daughter glanced up. "What will become of the legend of Kilglassie?"

"The legend is safe." Christian drew a sharp breath. Then, pushing back her thick, dark braid, she slipped her hand beneath the blue and purple plaid draped over her gown to touch the golden pendant on a leather cord around her neck. She traced the inlaid garnet surrounded by swirls of gold wire embedded in a small golden disc. The pendant was all that remained, now, of the castle's legend.

At least she had been able to save her harp and a few other things. But the fire would surely destroy the ancient treasure, never yet found, that legend said lay hidden somewhere inside Kilglassie Castle. Gone forever, all of it.

Christian lifted her head to stare at the dark smoke. The burning of Kilglassie was an act of defiance against the English—a necessary one. When the English soldiers arrived, there would be no Scottish castle to take, and no prisoners to capture.

Yet Christian felt like a traitor more than a loyal Scottish rebel. The fire would consume more than this stronghold in central Galloway: it would also destroy an ancient legend that foretold hope for Scotland. And none of them could afford to lose that now.

Burning timbers crashed inside the thick walls, sending up hot, bright sparks. Kilglassie's four towers were great belching chimneys now, blackened shells inside a curtain wall that enclosed only fire, smoke and ruined stone.

Set on a promontory overlooking a loch, the castle backed up to high, wild, forested slopes of Galloway in western Scotland. From those high crests, on a good, clear day, the hills of Ireland could be seen. On a bad day, the fires of the English armies sullied the sky with smoke.

"Christian!"

She glanced toward her cousin Thomas Bruce, who held the reins of two restive horses. He looked like a wild, proud prince, she thought, truly like the brother of a king. "We must hurry!" he called.

"Aye, Thomas." She answered in northern English, the language that her husband had taught her. Sighing, she turned away from the dark clouds that spiraled upward.

"King Robert's message was urgent," Thomas continued. "Now that you too are outlawed like the rest of us, my brother wants you to meet him in Strathfillan, and travel with his queen and family to safety at Kildrummy Castle. My brother Neil will guard you there. Hurry."

"Spare me another moment to speak to my daughter."

"Quickly," her cousin said. "We have all become renegades in the heather with my brother the king. The English look for us even now. There is no time."

She nodded. Her life had been thrown into turmoil when Robert Bruce made his bold move to take the throne of Scotland. After stabbing his key rival within the sanctified confines of a church, he had arranged to be crowned King of Scots, a courageous and necessary act for the good of Scotland, she knew. But after a disastrous defeat at Methven when the English had routed the Scots, Robert Bruce had taken to the hills with only a few followers, and all who supported him had been declared outlaws by the English king.

A cousin of the Bruces through her maternal grandmother, Christian had sent what help she could from Kilglassie: men, arms, some coin. Like a stone dropped in a pool, her actions created ripples, for she had invited the considerable fury of King Edward of England. Not long ago, her English husband had died in battle, leaving her and her daughter with no protection.

Now her home was burning, but it had been her decision.

Tugging on her daughter's hand, she walked toward her friend Moira, who waited. Bringing her child along would be too dangerous, so Moira and her husband had offered to keep Michaelmas safe until she returned. Soon Christian hoped to flee with her daughter into the western Highlands to her father's people, though the English were infiltrating the north now too.

Looking at her adopted daughter—so close to her heart that she felt like her own—Christian smoothed the girl's pale, silken hair. The child looked up, her light blue eyes more serious than nine years should allow.

"Micheal, listen now. Our friends Moira and Fergus will care for you," Christian said in the Gaelic she and the girl often used between them, though English came easily to both as well. "I will send for you as soon as I can. You are safe, *milis*, sweet one."

"Lady Christian," Thomas urged.

"Mother," Michaelmas said. "Cousin Thomas looks very angry. He will ride without you if you do not hurry."

"The Bruce brothers, all five, are known for being brave and handsome and clever—but not for patience. Let him wait." Christian took the pendant on its leather cord off to hand it to Michaelmas.

The ancient golden disk, no larger than the child's palm, was decorated with golden wire twisted in a graceful interlace design, surrounding a central garnet. Michaelmas looked up. "You are giving this to me?" she whispered in awe.

"Keep it safe," Christian said. "The women of my mother's family have always been the keepers of the legend. This is all we have of the treasure hidden somewhere in Kilglassie." She slipped it over her daughter's head. "Wear it and protect it. The English may have heard that Kilglassie contains a secret that is important to Scotland. But they will never find it."

"But I am not a hereditary keeper," Michaelmas said. "Moira's lads say that I am a changeling, just a child of the fair folk."

"Those lads! You came to us as a beautiful little orphan." Christian sighed. "True, we never learned who your parents were. But I know your mother must have been lovely and kind to have such a daughter. The nuns said you were born on Saint Michael's feast day in September, so they gave you that name. It brings you angelic protection. Remember the angels are always with you."

"May the angels be with you, too, *Màthair*, when you leave here," Michaelmas said.

"Christian!" Thomas called. "Will you wait for the English to arrive? We must go. Hug the wee lass for us all, and come ahead!"

Tucking the pendant under the neck of her daughter's gown, Christian hugged and kissed her. "Keep our secrets safe, *milis*," she whispered, and walked with the girl toward Moira.

Embracing her tall friend, thanking her, Christian turned away, tears pooling as she ran toward Thomas. Her cousin boosted her into the saddle of a ready horse and turned to mount his own charger. Settling sideways, Christian picked up the reins.

"Ready? Good." Thomas smiled. "Lady Christian MacGillan of Kilglassie," he said, "who burns her own castle, kisses her child, and now rides as an outlaw to join her fugitive king. You have courage and beauty, my lady. Forgive my impatience."

"Thomas Bruce, you have a silver tongue and more beauty than I have. I do not feel courageous at all." She watched dark smoke curl upward. "I feel frightened."

Thomas urged his horse forward. "Once the English retreat from Scotland, we will all have peace."

"I crave peace more than you know," she replied as she guided her horse beside his. "I was wed for eight years to an English knight, with an English garrison in my castle. Never again," she said vehemently. "The Sassenachs take our castles, our lands, and murder our people in the name of their king. It must end—with freedom for the Scots. There is no other way."

"Robert will succeed with the support of the Scots. But many do homage to Edward, with good reason."

"To protect their homes and families, and maintain what peace we can muster. I understand. All I had was Kilglassie, and King Edward allowed me to keep it if I paid homage to him for the lands and allowed a garrison inside with my English husband."

"You were very young then," he reminded her.

"Just fifteen when I was forced to sign an oath of fealty and marry a Sassenach knight. To be fair, we all thought the marriage would keep me safe."

"Sir Henry Faulkener was called a decent man."

"And I am called his murderer now."

"Nonsense. You had no hand in his death."

"Not directly." She glanced back to see Michaelmas standing with Moira, watching them depart. Anguish tugged at her breast. She turned away.

"Your husband took in an orphaned babe," Thomas said. "The act of a good man."

"He was good to others." She urged her horse forward.

So much was gone and changed—her husband, her castle, now her child in another's care. The English had even taken her father's castle in the western Highlands, killing her parents years ago. Kilglassie had belonged to her mother's people—descended from Celtic royalty, her mother had always proudly claimed—to come down to her. The old castle had been guardian to an even older legend.

And she had turned it into a ruin, destroying its heritage.

September, 1306. The Highlands.

THE STONE CHAPEL in a sunlit, shallow glen, was filled with screams; its steps were doused in blood. Shivering, Christian lay hidden behind a stand of nearby trees, helplessly watching. Only moments ago, Elizabeth—Bruce's queen—and their young daughter Marjorie, along with Robert Bruce's sisters and a young Scottish noblewoman, had been hauled from the chapel by English soldiers. The Scottish knights who had tried to protect them had been slain or captured.

In the weeks since Christian had joined the queen at Kildrummy, she had come to know those men and women well. Today they had been riding north, intending to escape to the Orkneys, when they had stopped to pray at this Highland chapel. English soldiers had ambushed them outside the chapel, outnumbering the Scottish knights who had fought so valiantly.

Now, breathing in tight little gasps, Christian watched, lying on her belly among the autumn leaves. She prayed as she hid. The only reason she had not been taken was that she had stepped away from the chapel for a walk, stiff from long hours on horseback. Hearing the screams, she had hidden, horrified.

Trembling, she rose to her feet and ran, leaping over fallen birch branches, skimming over the leaves, her feet pounding a rhythm. Too late she heard horses closing in behind her, hoofbeats muffled by the leafy carpet.

"Stop!" English soldiers called out. There were four of them. She ran on. But suddenly they were close—an arm swathed in chain mail reached out, only to miss her as she darted sideways. The man spurred his horse, trapping her between two horses. Someone grabbed her plaid and wrenched upwards, but she twisted and fell, scrambling to her feet, caught.

One man dismounted and threw himself on her, pinning her to the ground. The massive weight of his body in armor and padding was crushing. She could hardly move or breathe, though she bucked and cried out beneath him.

"Let her up." The voice above her head cut like cold steel.

The soldier came off her, grunting, and jerked her to her feet. Her hair covered her face in wild dark ropes until she tossed back her head defiantly to face a tall knight in a red surcoat.

Dhia, she thought; Dear God! Of all the English commanders who had visited her husband at Kilglassie, this man, Oliver Hastings, was the most vicious, or so it was said. A priest had once told her that when King Edward turned his wrath toward Scotland, the devil had sent Oliver Hastings to carry out the king's word to the letter.

"Ah. Lady Christian." Hastings stared at her, dark eyes narrowed, mouth grim. The neat black beard edging his jaw gave his face a lean precision. "How interesting to find you here with Bruce's women. I saw Kilglassie Castle. Bruce favors scorching Scottish earth, I hear."

She raised her chin. "King Edward has no cause to invade Scotland. We have cause to resist."

"Soon you can tell the king your pretty speech. And he will recognize you for a traitor." He drew off his leather gloves, slapping them against his right palm. His eyes were flat and dark. "King Edward has declared that the Bruce's women are to be treated as outlaws. No mercy. Any man may rob, violate or murder the lot of you without reprisal."

Christian's heart thundered in her chest. "No reprisal here on earth," she said low.

"That may be. But you are without protection now, my lady. Still, you will be safe in my care, provided I can rely on your compliance."

Panicking, she stood silent, waiting.

"Kilglassie is not far from Loch Doon Castle, my newest holding. We took the place from Bruce sympathizers several weeks ago."

Christian drew in a sharp breath, wondering what had become of Michaelmas, yet unable to ask. She did not want Hastings to know that her child was staying so near his property.

"Before Kilglassie was burned, I trust you moved whatever was of value." He looked at her expectantly.

"What do you want?" she asked. "Say it out."

"Kilglassie holds a treasure that supports the throne of Scotland. King Edward wants that hoard—he has the right, as king of both England and Scotland, or so it should be."

Her heart beat hard, more in anger than fear. "My own husband searched and could not find it," she snapped. "Why would I give it over to you?"

"He was a fool. I am not. And once the king discovers that you were the one burned that castle, he will be furious. He will demand the gold you kept there. Remember," he added softly, "how much you need my protection. Tell me where it is hidden."

"The treasure of Kilglassie has not been seen for generations."

"I said I am no fool, my lady."

"And I am no liar."

He smiled. "A rebel who does not lie? A wonder indeed. That treasure exists and you hold the truth to it. King Edward lays claim to whatever relics support the throne of Scotland."

"Robert Bruce has the true claim to the throne, and so the right to Kilglassie's gold."

He sighed. "Very well, keep your secret for now. But remember, rebellion earns its due." He held out a hand. "Come with me."

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Christian's breath caught, pinioned by a cold, piercing blade of fear. "What will Edward do?"
Hastings gave a stiff smile, his hand outstretched. "My lady. Have you ever imagined hell?"

Chapter One

January, 1307
Carlisle Castle, England

"A BIRD," GAVIN said thoughtfully. He gazed over the parapet edge. "A small bird in a cage."

Fog drifted through the boards of the square cage, a timber and iron enclosure, attached to the outside wall of the parapet. Inside, he could see the form of the woman wrapped in a blue plaid and huddled on the wooden floor. She lay still as a statue, reminding Sir Gavin Faulkener of some gruesome portrayal of death or the plague. Sad, he thought. How cruel.

Her slight form shifted beneath the wool. Now he saw a tangle of dark hair; long, slender fingers; a narrow foot in a leather boot. He heard her cough.

"God's bones! Caging a woman?" Gavin glanced at his uncle beside him. "Whatever prompted King Edward to do this? I have never heard of a Christian sovereign who dared to treat a woman in such a manner, no matter her rank."

"It is similar to a barbaric device I saw in the Holy Land, thirty years ago," Sir John Keith said. "But from the man called the flower o' chivalry, it is a muckle savage thing."

Gavin nodded grimly. "The king's hatred of the Scots cuts deep. Uncle John, I can well understand why you, as a Scotsman, are horrified by this."

"Aye, and it is partly why I wanted you to meet me up here."

Gavin reached out to tug on the small door of the cage, so close to where he stood. Locked. Scanning the unusual structure, he noted that it was barely six feet in length and width, lashed and nailed into place on the outer side of the castle wall. The planked base was nailed to the jutting wooden beams that normally supported hoardings, the timber constructions that protected soldiers during battle. The door had been placed in the opening in the crenellated wall.

The girl coughed again, long and deep, and turned her head. The dark hair sifted away from her face, revealing pale skin and purple shadows beneath her closed eyes.

"Jesu," Gavin muttered. "She is ill. How long has she been exposed out here?"

"Since September."

Gavin swore softly. "It is past Yuletide now. What a show of English chivalry. And her crime?"

"Her only crime is being a cousin to the Bruce. She was captured with his other womenfolk in the Highlands. King Edward has declared them rebels and traitors."

"He knows the principles of proper conduct in war. Noncombatants, especially women, merit protection and charity."

"Edward ignores the rules o' chivalric conduct when it suits him. He claims the Scots are under English jurisdiction and not a separate sovereign land." John looked at Gavin. "Edward had other cages made at Roxburgh and Berwick for Bruce's sister and the young countess of Buchan. Did you not hear of it?"

"I knew royal women were captured. I did not know the rest of it." Gavin set his mouth in a grim line. *Berwick.* Just the name of the town sent a chill down his spine. Within Berwick's walls ten years ago, he had witnessed enough savagery to change him from an idealistic young knight to an outspoken traitor. His actions had cost him much. He had spent years redeeming his reputation to gain back what he had lost.

Now, looking at this Scotswoman, he did not care to have the esteem of a king who would do such a thing to a woman.

He glanced at his uncle. "We only arrived at Carlisle this morning, and yet you've learned all this, and have been up here most of the day, from what the sentry told me."

"I saw the wee lass like this, and could not leave her. I thought you'd want to know, but you were at Lanercost Abbey in audience with the king and that pack o' French bishops we brought here. Truth be told, I could not bear another moment with those mitre-heads. They complained all the way from Paris like spoiled bairnies."

"It is tedious to be an ambassador, for certain. You were clever to ride away from our traveling party to wait here at Carlisle."

"Edward would not approve of a Scot in your entourage, even your own uncle. It will be a relief to return to France, where they welcome Scots."

Gavin loosened the leather thongs at his throat and shoved back his chain mail hood. His hair, dark gold, blew across his eyes, and he pushed it back. "We will not return to France for a while. I've decided to stay the winter. The king owes me good English land for my services to the crown. I mean to ask payment while I am here."

"Aye." John sighed. "But seeing this lass, I regret spending years in English service if it makes me part o' this."

"So your old Scottish soul yearns to fight in support of Robert Bruce?"

"You're half Scots by my own sister. Will you trust a king who would do this to a lass?"

Gavin shook his head, watching the cage. The Scottish girl reached out a thin hand to pull her plaid close. The cold wind stirred her hair. The tips of her fingers were red with the chill.

Warm layers of wool and quilted linen beneath his chain mail and cream-colored surcoat shielded him from the cold. His dark blue mantle, lined with fur, whipped around his legs. He wished he could spread his cloak over the girl. "Edward sets her out here like some bit of flesh bait. A lure for the king of Scots."

"Aye. Robert Bruce is in hiding, a renegade since the spring. Edward cages her and the other captured Scotswomen as a taunt."

He gave a grim nod. "What do you know of this one?"

"Widow to an English knight. Father and brothers dead—they were rebels who ran with William Wallace and later with the Bruce. The lass inherited a castle in Galloway that Edward sorely wanted. Still does."

"Does she have a name?"

"Lady Christian MacGillan."

"A clan name. You said her husband was an English knight."

"Many Scotswomen do not take their husbands' names."

"Who was her husband?"

"Henry Faulkener."

Gavin swore. "My cousin's widow? Jesu," he said, stunned. "Henry was older than my father. I hardly remember the man. In ten years, I had word from him but twice. When did he die?"

"Last summer, fighting the Scots. He wed the girl when he took possession of her castle."

"So that is why you wanted me to meet you up here."

"And because someone should speak to the king on her behalf."

"Edward will not pardon her, a Scot, so easily."

"He might listen to your appeal. You were once one o' his most favored knights."

"Long ago. Now he owes me a promise of land and a castle, and I mean to collect."

"But you successfully negotiated the marriage of his heir to the wee French princess. You're back in his graces now. Convince the king—"

"John," Gavin said curtly, "the only matter I plan to negotiate once I claim the land owed to me is the sale of my wool and grain at next season's harvest fair."

"*Ach*," John growled. "He values your diplomatic opinion."

Gavin frowned, gazing at the sad woolen bundle that was Henry's little widow. He heard the girl cough harshly and sink lower on the rough planked floor.

"She is your cousin by marriage."

"She is a little dying bird in a cage," Gavin said softly. "She ought to be removed to a convent and allowed to die in peace."

"Indeed," John said. "See to it."

MIST DRIFTED BETWEEN the wooden bars like ghosts, and Christian wondered if her own soul would drift free soon, a fragile wisp. She drew a ragged breath, feeling the drag of the illness in her lungs. Her feet were cold. She drew them under the plaid.

Only death would free her from captivity. But her daughter waited for her, needed her; she could not die. She stifled another cough. They were frequent, painful, and she was too exhausted to fight the illness, the chill, the hunger much longer.

Beyond the cage, she heard male voices. Guards often talked nearby, though by king's order none were permitted to speak to her. She shivered; her gown and plaid were not much protection from bitter winds. The blankets brought earlier had been taken away again; she was rarely allowed to keep blankets for long. She shivered again, coughed.

The men continued speaking softly. One had a gruff, older voice in a lilting Scots accent. The other spoke northern English in a deep, mellow voice soothing as the low strings of a harp.

She glanced toward the men and frowned. The older man was Scottish—were they both? Were they sent by Robert Bruce to ransom her? She felt hope, raised her head to peer at them.

And nearly gasped. The younger knight, tall and blond, looked like a warrior saint, shining and glorious—Saint Michael himself, she thought suddenly, sent to guard and comfort a dying girl. She blinked. Was he a vision, then?

His armor shimmered like silver, his pale surcoat was embroidered with golden wings, his blue cloak was the color of the night sky. Without hood or helmet, his golden hair touched his shoulders. He seemed made of shining steel and gold and heavenly peace. His badge, she saw then, wrapped around his upper arm encased in chain mail, showed an angel encircled in a buckled belt.

An archangel come to shepherd her in her final moments? She lifted a hand. She wanted him to take her away if he could. She could trust him.

But his presence must mean she was truly dying, and would never see her daughter again. She cried out at the thought, and

folded into the soft blackness that replaced the floor.

GAVIN FELT STRUCK to his very soul.

Lady Christian had lifted her head, hair in straggling tendrils framing her gaunt face, and had looked directly at him for a moment. That flash of deep green was a startling burst of life in her shadowed face. Her steady gaze showed strength and pride and asked no pity. The spark in her lustrous eyes had wrenched his heart. Somehow her fragile soul had touched his own, carefully guarded as it was. He exhaled and glanced at his uncle.

"Fainted away, she has," John said. "God save us, she looked at you as if you were some saint, standing there. As if you—" He stopped. "What was it Queen Eleanor called you, years ago? Aye, the Angel Knight. This one looked at you as if she believed you were her heavenly savior."

Gavin winced. The queen had given him the sobriquet years ago, in part because his shield and badge featured an angel. Although the Faulkeners, who had been royal falconers generations ago, had featured falcons on shield and badge, his father's ancestors had added a winged angel along with a falcon silhouette. The design had prompted Queen Eleanor to claim, with affection and amusement, that young Sir Gavin carried an angel because he was as beautiful as an archangel. He knew he resembled his beautiful Scottish mother, that similarity hardened in her blond son. He had his mother's Celtic gift, too, an ability to help others heal, though he kept that strictly to himself.

But as a young knight, he had enjoyed the attention of the queen and ladies of the court. He had charmed them, enjoyed their favor, thought himself special and gifted. He should have known it could not last.

That had been before the queen's death, before Berwick, and before he had married Jehanne. He had changed much since Jehanne's death. He had become arrogant. Now, he was glad to be cleansed of that. But that humility came at a high price.

Years ago, the darling knight of Queen Eleanor's circle, he had expected a pleasant future with a lovely, kind noble heiress, had expected to remain adored in the court. But war had disrupted the pleasantries at court, and he had been sent to fight for Edward. And before that, he had spent months watching helplessly as his wife wasted away in the insidious grip of a lung illness. When she died, he was not just humbled—he was devastated.

Jehanne had needed his help, just as this Scottish girl did now. But he was no savior. He had not been able to help Jehanne recover, and he could not help this wretchedly ill girl now.

Once he had believed that he could. Once he had believed that he was gifted, blessed, special. But his soul had grown hard, lost in shadow. No one would call him angel now. Least of all this dying girl.

He knew the signs—the rapid, shallow, noisy breaths; pale skin and bluish lips; coughing and weakness. The lung illness had a fierce hold over her. She could not be saved.

Yet suddenly, he wanted to tear open her cage and carry her away to safety. But that was a foolish notion fit for a *roman de chevalerie*.

"King Edward has little mercy where the Scots are concerned. He will not listen to me in this matter," he told John, turning away.

His uncle laid a hand on his sleeve. "We cannot leave here without seeing her free first."

"What would you have me do? Steal her away? I have no assurances to give you."

"The sentry said Oliver Hastings brought her here last September," John said then.

Turning, Gavin stopped. "So the king's demon still rides for England."

"Still acts as Edward's sword arm in Scotland, aye."

"No doubt he relishes every stroke."

"I hear he visits this girl whenever he is in Carlisle. Orders food withheld, blankets removed. The guards say he questions her mercilessly."

Gavin fisted his hands. "He has a taste for cruelty. What does he want from her?"

"The sentry did not ken the issue between them. She will not talk to Hastings, though he has beaten her, they say."

"Jesu," Gavin growled. "Must you tell me this?"

"Aye," John said quietly.

Gavin glanced toward the girl. Though his heart seemed to twist in his chest, he turned away and began to stride along the wall walk. "She will likely die before the king grants me an interview."

"You'll help her, then. Angel knight—it is still in you, lad," John said as he walked with him.

Gavin gave a flat laugh. "I spent eight years in the French court. A man emerges a cynic or a sinner from there. Never a saint. She is dying, and worse, a Scot. The king will not listen."

"You can convince him."

"You credit me too well. I spoke my mind before, at Berwick, and earned myself charges of treason and exile. The king could have ordered me hanged. I am scant hope as that girl's savior. Remember—Edward despises the Scots with a poisonous fury." He stalked ahead, then saw a sentry nearby. "Bring a coal brazier and blankets to the prisoner," he snapped.

The guard blinked. "My lord—"

"Now!" Gavin roared. The man nodded and ran along the wall walk.

"Ah," John remarked as they walked on.

"Little enough to do for the girl."

"That and getting permission to remove her to a convent, is little enough well done."

"You are a stubborn man when you find a cause. You need more adventure, I think."

John grinned. "That may be. The day your father and I rescued that Saracen princess near Acre is a day I have never forgotten. And you may need a fine adventure as well, lad."

"Careful, sir. How did this girl capture your tough old Scots heart?"

John shrugged. "Reminds me of Jehanne. I cannot watch another lass wither like that."

Gavin looked away. "She will only die in your arms for your trouble."

"All I ask is permission to take her out o' there. Your own mother was Scottish—"

"Aye, and my lady mother might have laid hands on her in that strange Celtic way she had and healed this girl. But my mother is dead, and this girl has not the rarest hope of a miracle."

"*Ach,* once they called you the Angel Knight. You were a hero. Where is that one now?"

"Gone, for the most part." Gavin sighed. The girl in the cage tugged at his heart. "It would take a miracle to convince King Edward of any mercy."

"You'll do it," John said firmly.

"I no longer believe in miracles." Gavin strode away through cold fog.

A FEVER-DREAM, THAT was all. Christian looked toward the bare wooden bars of the cage door. No one stood there now. No guards, no angel.

She forced herself to a seated position and leaned back against the bars, coughing harshly. Shivering, she pulled the worn plaid up over her shoulders. The illness was affecting her mind.

She wondered if Dominy would be here soon. The English servant woman tended to her two or three times each day, bringing soup, bread and sometimes wine, and escorted her to the privy in the tower. Christian looked forward to those times in the day, like sunlight in darkness.

Dominy's hands were warm and gentle. The woman sometimes hugged her, even fed her when she was too weak to eat. And she spoke to the prisoner despite the king's orders against it.

But Dominy had not come that day, so Christian guessed Oliver Hastings must be back in Carlisle again: her blankets had been removed and her morning meal had been bitter wine and stale bread, his usual orders for her.

With luck, he would be too busy with the king to visit her this time. She could not bear to hear his voice, low and toneless. She did not think he would hit her, weak as she was. The king's guards would not allow Hastings to abuse her, though they still obeyed King Edward's orders toward her. She closed her eyes and leaned her head back.

Hastings wanted Kilglassie's gold, but she could not help him. She had never seen it herself, and felt sure it was gone. For a moment, she allowed herself a daydream, picturing herself in the great hall, seated with her harp. The fire-basket in the center of the room radiated glowing heat. Her gown was soft, her cloak lined with fur. Her belly was full. She would sleep at night in a big soft bed.

She could almost feel the cool, polished willow wood harp in her hands, could sense the tightly drawn brass wires beneath her fingertips. She imagined the delicate sounds of the strings, could almost hear the familiar tones, pure and round and true, as she thought through the plucking pattern of a melody.

The memory of the music, all these months, had helped save her. She had learned to play the wire-strung harp as a child, and knew, with a harper's finely detailed memory, a great many of the Scottish and Irish songs played by generations of Celtic harpers. Those melodies brought her a sense of joy, healing, and peace.

She could find those feelings again, even in this brutal place, by closing her eyes to listen to the music in her mind while strumming her fingers in the familiar patterns. She sometimes hummed the songs too, but her voice was hoarse from coughing.

When she listened to her inner music, she did not feel the keen bite of the cold or the painful weakness in her lungs. She heard the songs floating on the air, light and lyrical and soothing. They seemed to shine in the darkness like drops of gold and silver, like stars.

Closing her eyes, she moved her fingers in a rhythm and gave herself up to the music. Soon the cage bars disappeared from her awareness. She pictured herself playing the harp in her home but would not picture the smoldering ruin of Kilglassie Castle as she had last seen it; that thought was devastating.

Chapter Two

"We shall find a new mission for you now that you have returned, Gavin." Edward Plantagenet tipped back his goblet and downed the contents.

"I doubt any ambassador can convince Robert Bruce to surrender, sire," Gavin replied wryly.

"He has no right to the crown," Edward growled. "The young craven has turned traitor. Once I trusted him as one of my finest knights. Now he calls himself King of Scots. Hah! King Hob, my soldiers call him." He gestured impatiently. "I will see him captured and drawn through the streets of London, then hanged and quartered—and displayed about the country in parts—like Wallace." He smiled, feral-toothed. "I have made a solemn vow to be avenged on Robert Bruce and all Scotland for this rebellion. I will not rest until it is done."

Gavin poured wine into the king's goblet and filled his own silver cup. The red liquid glowed like melted rubies in the firelight. The roaring blaze made him think of Henry's little widow in her cold cage. He wondered how to remind the king of his obligation as a merciful sovereign.

He downed his wine quickly. He had been surprised at first that Edward chose to stay at Lanercost Abbey, holding his audiences in a small chamber there, instead of the garrisoned castle at Carlisle. But now he understood why.

Edward was clearly ill. The king had suffered for years from bouts of fever acquired in the Holy Land, and now that illness was taking its toll, aging the king since Gavin had seen him last, broad shoulders bowed lower, his graying leonine head turned a striking white, his skin thick and pallid. Even his voice, always commanding despite a lisp, was strained and tired.

The quiet of the abbey would be beneficial for an old, sick man, and the monks were clearly tending to him medically. Gavin saw the bruised cuts from recent bleedings on Edward's long forearm, where his velvet sleeve had fallen back.

Edward rubbed his wide hand over his chest and shifted in his chair, his long legs angled awkwardly. The X-shaped design of the abbey chairs was unsuited to tall men, Gavin thought, seated in one himself, stretching his long legs out before him. Edward Longshanks, who towered above most men, looked uncomfortable.

"Have you plans to return to France?" the king asked.

"Not yet, sire. My castle at Fontevras runs smoothly with or without me. I thought to stay in England through the winter."

The king nodded. "Fontevras remains yours through the tradition of *curtesie* in your widowing."

"Aye, your Grace. When I die, 'twill revert back to my wife's family, since Jehanne and I had no children."

"How long since she died?"

"Two years, sire. She was so young."

"A sad thing, her illness. My dear first queen loved Jehanne dearly. Eleanor would have been pleased to know that you married her niece, for she loved you well. She even gave you that name you go by. Angel Knight."

"I was devoted to Queen Eleanor, my liege. I—do not use the name. She did, bless her memory."

Edward frowned into his cup. "You were a young knight when Eleanor died, but a worthy one. I will not forget that you rode beside her coffin all the way from Lincoln to London. When I wanted stone crosses erected at each place we stopped for the night, you saw it done. Queen Eleanor's angel, they called you." Edward was silent for a moment. "Sixteen years have passed, and I love her still."

"She was a gracious lady, sire."

"I am indebted to you for that journey, despite what you did later." The king downed a long draught of wine. "You betrayed me at Berwick, just as Robert Bruce has betrayed me," Edward added in a low growl. Gavin realized the king was halfway toward sodden drunk.

"Sire," he said. "I but spoke my honest mind to you at Berwick."

"Only the fact that you showed devotion to Queen Eleanor saved you from a hanging then."

"I endured exile and dispossession for my words to you. 'Tis past and paid for."

Edward grinned slyly. "I made you pay at the French court. A nest of vipers, eh? I needed a clever man there to arrange truces and marriages. You did well."

"I did what I could, Sire."

"And now you have brought the French bishops here to convey the Pope's approval for my son's marriage. But so far, the bishops only want to discuss the situation with the Scots. The Pope has sent messages with them. Not all of his letters are to my liking." Edward glanced at Gavin. "Do you mean to stay now?"

"If I may, my liege. I am at your service."

"And where shall you live if you stay?" Edward grinned. "Men shall never say my memory was short. I dispossessed you, and now I owe you lands for capable service to me since then. I might give your disinherited lands back one day. But first I

will grant you another holding within my realm."

Gavin narrowed his eyes. "England, Sire?"

"Scotland. You will take over Kilglassie Castle in Galloway. Your cousin Henry had a garrison there. I have decided to grant those lands to you."

Gavin was stunned. "My liege—"

"Go there and bend those stubborn Scottish rebels in Galloway to English will. I assume you have learned the proper attitude since your outburst at Berwick." Edward slid him a sharp, fast glance. "We could call this return to Scotland a test of your loyalty."

Gavin straightened in the hard curve of the chair. He had not anticipated Scottish lands. And he surely did not crave involvement in the morass of problems between Scotland and England. "I do not care for the current policies in Scotland, Sire," he said softly, daringly. "I never will."

"Have a care how you speak to your sovereign," Edward warned. "You have been in France too long. They are overly sympathetic to the Scots. Surely you have better wisdom."

"I have not changed my opinions, Sire."

"See that you do. You owe your fealty to me. My opinions in this matter are therefore yours." Edward glared at him. "Hold Kilglassie and garrison it. Robert Bruce may hide in Carrick or Galloway, and Kilglassie sits in the hills between those lands. I want Bruce found. You are one of the few knights who can match his skill with weapons. Hunt him down and bring him to me. Act as my arm in that part of Galloway."

"Sire." Clenching a fist, Gavin bowed his head in reluctant acceptance. He realized he had little choice in the matter. Necks were fragile in nature.

Kilglassie in Galloway had been Henry's holding. And the girl in the cage was Henry's little widow. How ironic that he should come here intending to speak on behalf of his cousin's widow and end up bestowed with her dower lands.

"Pass this test, Gavin, and I will reward you well," Edward said, his voice blurred with wine.

Gavin opened his mouth to protest or perhaps question, for he was still astonished, when a loud rap sounded at the door.

"Ah," the king said. "That will be my commander in that part of Galloway. I sent for him to join us. Let him in."

Frowning, Gavin went to the oak door and pulled it open to admit a tall knight in a red surcoat. The man strode silently past Gavin toward the king, dropped to a knee and bowed his head.

Gavin sighed, recognizing Oliver Hastings. He had heard the knight was now regarded as one of Edward's most trusted commanders in Scotland. Hastings had always had a ruthless taste for the Scottish war, he remembered.

"Sir Oliver, you remember Gavin Faulkener," the king said. "He just came from Paris with the bishops sent by the pope."

"Sir Oliver," Gavin said as Hastings rose and turned.

Narrowing his dark eyes, Hastings removed his gauntlets. "Faulkener. Some years since we last saw each other. Berwick, I think?" He turned again to the king, who spoke quietly to him.

Leaning a shoulder against the wall, Gavin waited, remembering John Keith's remark about Hastings mistreating the Scotswoman in the cage. But Hastings would not even bother with Henry's widow unless he wanted something specific. What could that be?

He knew Hastings was capable of brutalizing women; he had seen that in Berwick. And he had heard reports of cruel actions Hastings had taken against the Scots on behalf of Edward. Standing there, waiting, he summoned control, schooling his expression, giving no clue to the old rage still simmering within him.

Doubtless Sir Oliver Hastings had forgotten one small Scottish nunnery among the many towns and religious houses sacked in Scotland. Gavin's mother had been among the women who had died when Hastings's patrol had sacked that convent eight years ago. Ultimately the blame for that raid rested on King Edward, who had ordered the nunnery closed, but Gavin suspected that Hastings had acted as an efficient, unquestioning sword arm.

Though Gavin knew his mother's death was a tragic casualty in a war that he, as Edward's avowed knight, was obligated to support, the convent raid had occurred while he had been away in France. He had no chance to hear a warning or move his mother. He had received a cool written condolence from King Edward over his mother's death, and the king had made a brief prayerful penance for the raid. It was said he fined Hastings for the brutality, but Gavin knew it meant little to either Edward or Hastings.

All in the past, Gavin told himself, and pointless to avenge. Naught could be recovered. He sighed and shifted his feet, feeling the tension of bitterness and weariness. His chain mail hung heavy on his shoulders, both physically and perhaps symbolically; he huffed in silence at the thought.

He scowled, waiting, considering the king's grant of an obscure Gallovidian castle. Edward seemed determined to pull Gavin into the Scottish dispute. He was sorely tempted to refuse the grant and the order, though it could label him treasonous.

But before this night was done, he would step even closer to treason once he found the chance to request that the king release the dying Scotswoman.

"COME WITH ME, my lady."

Stirred from sleep, Christian felt a hand on her shoulder. "Dominy," she whispered, and opened her eyes to focus on a young face, round and pleasant, and a pair of deep brown eyes framed by dark braids and a linen head kerchief.

"Aye, my lady," Dominy murmured. "Get up, now, dear."

"Do not speak to the prisoner," a guard snapped.

Groaning, Christian tried to sit up, but failed. The timber slats leaked cold air and light, and the cage swayed slightly as she fell back down. She drew a raspy breath; her head spun and her limbs felt wobbly. But she was alive. The warrior angel had been only a dream.

Sitting with Dominy's help, Christian frowned, realizing her feet were warm. Surprised, she noticed a small iron brazier, filled with glowing coals, nearby. It had never been there before.

"Aye," Dominy murmured. "Someone brought ye a brazier while ye slept. I asked several times that one be given ye, but the guard always said me nay. Who did this, and gave ye better blankets? By the saints, have the Scots sent coin for yer keep?"

"Dame, do not speak to the prisoner," the guard barked out again.

Dominy turned. "And how am I to wake her, Thomas, d'ye suggest?"

"Well, you're not to talk to her."

The woman snorted in disdain and turned back. "Can ye get up, sweet? I've brought broth and bread. Thick with onions, the soup is, and hot."

"Dominy," Thomas said. "The lady gets only silence by king's command. It is treason to disobey the king's orders."

"Then arrest me too and throw me in with her," Dominy said. "She might get better care. How can ye stand there each day while she suffers? My husband, bless his departed soul, was a king's guard too, but he would never have let this happen beneath his very nose."

"I only follow king's orders," Thomas grumbled.

"Hmph. Who ordered the brazier and the blankets?"

"An English lord, just arrived today. I do not know his name."

Christian blinked, remembering the warrior with the steady gaze and deep blue eyes. Not Saint Michael come to take her away, but an English knight? But the concern she had seen in his eyes had seemed real.

"Whoever he is, it's a good man ordered that done, brave and kind." Dominy hoisted Christian under the arms, helping her to stand, supporting her on one ample hip. "Get in here and help me, man," Dominy gasped. "She's too weak to stand and she's slippery as a buttered eel in this damp plaid, though she weighs little more than a bairn just now."

Christian tried to straighten her legs, but could not find the strength. Thomas opened the door wider and reached in, grunting as he leaned forward. The narrow door of the cage opened into the space between two merlon blocks on the crenelated wall.

"Bring her here, then, and I'll lift her out."

Dominy dragged Christian toward him, and the guard closed his big hands around Christian's waist. He flopped her over his shoulder and slid backward through the door. Dominy clambered out after them.

"Carry her to the tower. But remember she is a lady, and no sack of barley grain!"

Thomas shifted Christian in his arms. She leaned her head on his shoulder and looked up at the wide twilight sky as he carried her toward the tower door. They went down a torchlit staircase as Dominy followed. Thomas set Christian down by an interior door and she stood, legs trembling.

"Wait here, Thom." Dominy led Christian through the door and along a narrow dark corridor, withdrawing while Christian used the small privy area. A few minutes later, Dominy returned.

"Now we can talk without that man to hear us," Dominy whispered loudly. "Can ye believe I ever thought him handsome? He has a nose like a Pascal loaf and a belly like a boar's. Breath like one, too."

Christian laughed; that felt good. She leaned against the wall and relished the musty, close air in the corridor, enjoying the warmth, the torchlight, the solid enclosure of stone walls. She was so tired of wind and mist and cold. Her legs were feeble and uncertain from months captivity. These brief moments in the tower, albeit two or three times a day, were havens of peace and comfort.

"Curse old King Edward," Dominy grumbled. "Will the Scots not ransom ye from here, my lady? I fear for yer health, I do, if ye stay in that foul cage longer."

Christian began to answer but began to cough, her throat raw with it.

Dominy frowned and touched a hand to Christian's brow. "Yer cough grows worse and ye feel a bit feverish. The broth may help. There are onions and garlic in it." She sighed. "By the saints, I wish I could help ye more."

"You have done so much for me." Christian's voice felt weak. The broth would help her throat and her cough, but she had forgotten what true appetite was. She would force herself to eat; today she felt a small wellspring of hope. The golden knight had shown her kindness. She prayed he was a Scottish knight, sent by her cousin Robert Bruce to ransom her freedom.

"Dominy!" Thomas called. "Bring her out!"

"A moment! Wretched man," Dominy added beneath her breath. "Wantin' to take ye back there so soon." She put an arm

around Christian's waist. "Dear saints, yer but bones and skin. And ye must be so cold there at night, though that brazier is a blessing from heaven itself. Can I bring ye aught else, then? Nay? I'll bring ye an extra bowl of broth anyway. Come here." Dominy wrapped her in a hug.

The embrace was so kind and comforting that tears sprang into Christian's eyes.

"THEN WHERE IN God's name has Bruce gone? The last word my commanders sent was that he was in Ireland!" King Edward shouted at Sir Oliver Hastings. Leaning against the wall, Gavin straightened, his interest caught.

"Robert Bruce has gone west. They say he is hiding in the western Isles. Clan Donald there supports him loyally. So do the Campbells, though we have some alliance with the MacDougalls. We are trying to find him. I suspect he will try to cross into Galloway at first chance, perhaps from the Isle of Arran."

"Now? In winter?"

"Sire, the weather near the Irish sea is not so harsh as here along the border. A crossing and a campaign through Scotland is quite possible."

"Bruce's lands in Carrick may contain men loyal to him. But if you and the rest of my host had done as ordered, Robert Bruce would have no support anywhere."

"My liege, we hold nearly every castle in Galloway and Ayrshire now. And I have lately taken Loch Doon. When Bruce lands, he will be quickly captured."

"Nearly every castle, you said."

"We had Kilglassie, as you know, but it is in ruins."

"I just gave Kilglassie to Faulkener to hold. Come here." He beckoned, and Gavin stepped forward.

"You gave Kilglassie to him?" Hastings asked in astonishment.

"His cousin held it," Edward said. "Sir Gavin, you will assess the situation at Kilglassie, then request men and supplies through Sir Oliver at Loch Doon Castle."

"My liege," Hastings said, "Loch Doon is not far from Kilglassie. I can easily command both sites."

Edward turned a flat glare on Oliver. "Do you question my orders?"

"Sire, Kilglassie was burned and cannot house a garrison. It needs repair and supervision."

"Faulkener will be responsible for that. Then he can help to quell the Scottish rebellion. The more Scottish castles we hold, the better the Scots will understand I am their overlord." Edward stood to look down at the men from his considerable, if stooped, height. "Until I feel strong enough to ride at the head of an army, I must rely on my commanders to deal with the Scots as I would deal with them. You are all my sword arm."

"Of course, your Grace," Hastings answered.

"I have sworn upon my soul that Scotland will be conquered!" The king slammed a hand to the table. "I will not rest until 'tis done. I want you to raise the dragon. Raise it for every patrol, skirmish, and battle until Robert Bruce is defeated and Scotland falls to our might!"

"Sire," Gavin said, "asking your garrison commanders to raise the banner of death each time they ride out is a declaration of no mercy. There is no political advantage to using the *guerre mortelle* in this war. If I may say so, my liege."

"On the contrary, that is exactly what is needed," Hastings said. "The Scots need a fierce hand."

"This will only encourage them to resist more than before," Gavin said.

"Resistance whets our appetite. Raise the dragon banner in Scotland," Edward said. "See it done."

"Aye, Sire," Hastings said, his face was a cold, stony mask. Gavin realized that Hastings, along with so many English nobles and knights, had become a merciless extension of Edward Plantagenet's vengeance, as eager and determined as the king to conquer and destroy the Scots.

And Lady Christian MacGillan was simply a prize in that war. Gavin sighed.

This was hardly the best moment to ask the king for leniency regarding the girl. He wanted to attend to it before Edward ended the audience and dismissed them, but he would have to go about it tactfully.

"Sire," Gavin said, "Pope Clement is concerned about your actions toward the Scots. He has instructed the French bishops to make a private report to him."

Edward tipped a brow. "He sent me a letter on that subject. But he has also directed the bishops to excommunicate Robert Bruce and his supporters, so his holiness is not entirely against me. The rites will be performed on the morrow."

Gavin nodded. "The pope wrote to me as well, Sire, bidding me to remind you that he will excommunicate you as well if you do not ease your harsh policies toward the Scots."

"I will not pull back. I trust my ambassadors will smooth the way with the Holy Church of Rome."

"As one of those advisers, please allow me to suggest a small gesture that may reassure Rome."

"What is that?"

"Sire, you hold Henry Faulkener's Scottish widow prisoner at Carlisle."

"She committed treason. She paid fealty for that land years ago, but last summer she captured the damned tower from her own husband when he rode out. Henry had to seige his own place just to get back in for his supper! Hah! Killed him, she did," Edward said more soberly. "And so I have placed her where she will serve as an example of how Scotland falls to the English."

Gavin leaned forward. "Sire, I suggest you reconsider her situation. The woman is seriously ill. 'Tis one matter to confine a noblewoman to a convent as a political prisoner. 'Tis another to allow such a woman to die of mistreatment in a cage, witnessed by the public." He paused. "And the French bishops."

"Christ's blood. You have a point," Edward muttered.

"A virtuous prince tempers his anger with clemency, sire," Gavin said. "She is dying. Let me remove her to a convent."

"If deaths weighed on my conscience, I would scarce be able to lift my head from my pillow," Edward said. "Still, the bishops are here—" He frowned and scratched his silvery beard.

"One other point, sire," Gavin said. "Remember her name."

"Eh? Christian? Oh." Edward frowned. "The pope will hardly overlook the death of a captive woman called Christian, just after Yuletide, and in one of my castles."

"Exactly, Sire."

"My liege," Hastings interrupted. "You proclaimed that these Scotswomen were to be punished in accordance with the crimes of their male relatives. I captured this lady myself on your order."

"Sir Oliver," Edward barked out. "Did you get the truth from her regarding that gold, as I asked?"

Gavin frowned. "Gold?"

"An old tradition says that there is treasure in Kilglassie Castle," Edward replied. "Treasure that supports the ceremonial reign of Scottish kings."

"Ah." Gavin suddenly understood why Kilglassie had more than ordinary importance to Edward.

"The girl has refused to say where she has hidden it," Hastings told the king, ignoring Gavin. "I had food withheld from her for days and did what I could to coerce her. If she is near death, I must question her again."

"Aye. Find out the damned truth of it," Edward muttered.

"Your Grace, I remind you that Kilglassie is near Loch Doon. Let me act as commander in both places. I will search Kilglassie thoroughly, every stone," Hastings said.

"Faulkener will search it," the king said. "Sir Gavin, my chamberlain will draw up a charter of ownership for the castle and its environs. As for the Scottish wench—" He frowned. "You say she is dying?"

"She is exceedingly ill and weak, sire. It seems to be a lung disease. I have seen it in others."

"Jesu. I do not need another barrage of letters from Rome, and more penances." Edward nodded. "Remove her from the cage and take her to a convent. I will sign the order for her release. She remains a prisoner until she dies. However—" The king paused.

Gavin raised his eyebrows, hardly daring to speak.

"I want the truth of that hidden gold before she dies. I have captured the Stone of Scone and the Scottish royal regalia and brought them to London. Whatever else the Scots have hidden away in Kilglassie, 'tis mine by right. Find it."

Gavin frowned. "I will do what I can, Sire."

"Do more than that. Tell her if the gold is found and sent to me, I will pardon her."

"I told her that," Hastings interrupted. "She refused and spat in my face. The woman is a shrew."

"You should have used force," the king snapped. "Or charm. Women are susceptible to sweet words."

"She would not tell her own husband where it was," Hastings said.

"Henry was a good soldier, but he had no talent with women. Neither do you," Edward said bluntly. "Unlike Sir Gavin, who has caused countless ladies to do his bidding. The Angel Knight—by God! Hah!" Edward slammed the table triumphantly. "That is our answer!"

"Sire?" Gavin asked apprehensively.

"Win her trust. Charm her and press her for the truth of that gold. Marry her if you must."

"Sire, she is dying," Gavin said between his teeth.

"Then hurry. You will be a wealthy widower." Edward grinned. "Convince her to tell her beloved husband where the gold is kept."

"Sire," Hastings said. "I can simply tell the girl she will die unshriven and excommunicated if she refuses to speak. The threat of hell should loosen her tongue."

"She'd die just to spite you. Gavin will wed her and secure the truth with honey." Edward grinned.

Listening, Gavin clamped his teeth together. Edward was unconcerned that the girl was dying because of his orders, nor did he care that this new order would render Gavin a widower again within the week. The king cared only about his war, his

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Exploring the Variety of Random Documents with Different Content

When sorrow's dark shadows come like a death pall,
And the dead leaves of hope by adversity fall,
They come o'er the desert that looms in the heart,
And a newness, a freshness, a verdure impart.

IV.

In the blue purpling waves of the sun-tinted sky,
In the moonbeam, the sunbeam, the vesper's low sigh,
In the still quiet eve, and the night-wind's low moan,
Unembodied in words, yet to thought are they known.

V.

In the low languid zephyr that steals through the dell,
With a sweetness and sadness like lovers' farewell;
In each flower and meadow, each leaflet and brook,
They each add a page to that mystical book.

VI.

O'er each object of nature alike they unfold
A veil of deep mystery ever untold;
For the rose in its modest and calm peaceful rest,
Has infinite secrets enclosed in its breast.

VII.

Can it be that the spirit of genius yet lives,
And to nature this chain of enchantment thus gives;
That the souls of the dead, in this beautiful guise,
Beam out like the light of some love angel's eyes?

VIII.

Ah, no!—'tis a glory through life's mist that strays,
Like the dawning of morn through an autumn's thick haze,
'Tis the light of a glory for ever to shine,
'Tis a something within us—a something divine.

Compages Ossium.

(Lines composed while looking into an opened grave from my study window.)

I.

In sad reflection thee I scan,
Lone tenant of this cell;
Oh, could'st thou speak to mortal man,
What mysteries would'st thou tell!

II.

Here hast thou lain in sleep profound,
And years, long years, have fled,
Since friends and loved ones, gathering round,
Wept o'er thy lowly bed.

III.

Perchance through long and lonely hours,
With heart-sick grief they mourned;
And clad thy early grave with flowers,
As oft as spring returned.

IV.

Perchance ’twas wit or beauty’s queen,
Or wealth, that here lies low;
But who or what thou may’st have been,
It matters nothing now.

V.

What thoughts were thine, what dreams of fame,
What pride that would transcend!
But grief, or guilt, or woe, or shame,
All here would seem to end.

VI.

We little know, perchance thy bier
Was borne by willing knave,
Whose ruthless hand hath laid thee here
To fill a pauper’s grave.

VII.

In sad reflection thee I scan,
Lone tenant of this cell;
Oh, could’st thou speak to mortal man,
What mysteries would’st thou tell!

VIII.

Now all is o’er—how vain, how weak,
Are earthly strife and power—
The bubble on the brooklet’s cheek,
The tempest of an hour.

IX.

Oh, human pride, how weak, how vain!
An evanescent breath;
Oh life!—the memory of a pain,
That will not die with death.

X.

What checkered things our lives will be,
How awful to behold,
When in eternity we see
Life's motley web unrolled!

MYSTICS.

I.

TWO rose bushes grew side by side:
The light of heaven bathed them both;
The dews of heaven decked them both;
Yet one grew tall and beauteous to behold,
The other drooped and died,
Its beauty all untold.
The dews that decked the one to bloom,
But decked the other for the tomb;—
What mystery in their growth!

II.

Shadows were they of something real,
Shadows which none may ever see,
But every heart may feel.
The light of heaven bathed them both,
The dews of heaven decked them both,
And both were wrapped in mystery;
Yet one was doomed to sturdy growth,—
The other doomed to die!
And who may ask the reason why?
Having been something, can they be
Nothing to all eternity?

Eyes That Are Used to Weeping.

I.

Eyes that are used to weeping
Through lonely hours of gloom,
And silent vigils keeping
O'er a loved but hopeless tomb;
From beyond Life's dusky curtain,
From the shore of the dim unknown—
Where vague shadows flit uncertain—
Comes a message all thine own:

"The deeper becomes the measure
Of the cup of grief you drain,
The larger the draught of pleasure
For you it may contain."

II.

Hearts that are used to breaking
O’er vows that have come to naught,
That, in hopeless silence aching,
With pain are overfraught;
Though Life’s taper be dimly burning,
So that shadows faintly fall,
There comes through this vale of mourning
A spirit voice to all:
“The deeper becomes the measure
Of the cup of grief you drain,
The larger the draught of pleasure
For you it may contain.”

Oh, Thou Hast Wept Long.

I.

Oh, thou hast wept long, yet thy heart is still aching;
There are tears that ne’er fall, though the sad heart be breaking;
And that bright day of hope—all too soon ’tis passed o’er,
And the light of thy life has gone out evermore.

II.

When the heart is left lonely there’s naught can atone:
Though a nation weep with thee—thou weepest alone;
And thine is a sorrow too deep e’en for tears
To relieve the lone heart through the desolate years.

III.

We are told that a goddess once dwelt here below,
Who, for some sad mischance, was doomed ever to woe;
And her tears, as they fell on this cold world of ours,
Springing up from the dust, bloomed in bright fragrant flowers.

IV.

And oft have I gazed on those sad eyes of thine,
Where beauty's soft lustre seems ever to shine,
And have thought that the tears of the just may yet bloom
In fragrance and beauty beyond the dark tomb.

Transition.

I.

I AROSE at that dim-lined hour,
When the day and the morning meet;
And I passed by the city tower,
Far, far through the dusty street.
And I went by meadows and fountains
Till I came where frowning high,
A range of towering mountains
Hid their summits in the sky.

II.

But a troubled spirit led me,
Lured by some guiding star,
And o'er the dim heights sped me,
To sunset realms afar;
So with yearning and strife that seemed ever
To be linked with toil and pain,
I crossed with a mighty endeavor,
And passed beyond in the plain.

III.

And a nameless terror bound me
As I gazed on those earth-born spires,
Which, towering above and around me,
Seemed wrapped in lurid fires;
And a spirit of doubt passed o'er me,
And I murmured with half-bowed head,
"Hath ever a mortal before me
Crossed over a height so dread?"

IV.

But on I passed, unheeding,
Through the noontide's ebbing light,
While, ever behind me receding,
Sank the mountains lessening height;
Till at last 'neath the distant heaven,
The scarce seen crests upreared
In the purple waves of even,
Sank down and disappeared.

V.

I arose at that dim-lined hour,
When youth and manhood meet,
But Grief and o'erwhelming power
Cast her burden at my feet;
And it rose like a mountain dreary,
And my heart was faint within,
For my soul grew sick and weary
In a world of death and sin.

VI.

But with yearning and strife that seemed ever
To be linked with toil and pain,
I crossed with a mighty endeavor
And passed beyond in life's plain;
And as the broad noon was sinking;
I beheld in the distant light
The giant mountain shrinking
And fading on my sight.

VII.

Now the sunset shadow lengthens,
While the light of evening fails,
And the holy calm which strengthens
The worn out soul prevails;
And I look to the distant heaven,
Where the mountain late upreared,
And lo, in the purple even
It hath almost disappeared!

The Mystery of the Sea.

I.

THE good ship cleared the harbor bar,
And a fair west wind was blowing;
The misty mainland, stretching far,
O'er the sunlit sea was glowing.

II.

And the captain paused as the deck he paced,
While visions of home came o'er him;
And a weeping mother his fancy traced
In the scenes that passed before him.

III.

And in the cabin with tiny hands
Two children together were playing,
While a weary mother in mission lands,
Heart-sick for them was praying.

IV.

Years passed—so long, so lone the time
Since the good ship had departed,
And in Columbia's sunny clime
Died a mother, broken-hearted.

V.

Years passed—and a mother forlorn, alone,
Aweary with waiting and sighing,
Afar in India's burning zone
Lay, broken-hearted, dying.

VI.

And the cruel, restless, rolling ocean
Complains its bitter part;
But oh, far down 'neath the waves wild motion
Lies the grave of many a heart!

FAITH.

I.

THOU hast seen how a ring in its clasp may enfold
A diamond more dazzling, more precious than gold;
And the gem to the ring gives a lustre more bright,
Like the glance from the eye of an angel of light.

II.

Thus Faith is a ring, we may see in its grasp
A gem more resplendent than gold may enclasp;
'Tis the Pearl of great Price set by Heaven above
In that ring is the gift of obedient love.

A LAMENT.

(From an unpublished Drama written in early life.)

I.

ONCE lightly I roamed o'er these green fields and meadows;
As bright as my future all things seemed to shine;
And in the clear heavens there hovered no shadows,
For all seemed a realm of glory divine.

II.

Now changed is this realm—all bliss has departed,
And chill does the river of life seem to flow;
In these meadows and moors, where I wandered light-hearted,
Naught, naught can I trace but a region of woe.

III.

Now in the bright woodland the sweet birds are singing,
Their notes in soft concord float through the calm air;
While in deepest distress now my sad heart is wringing,
And ever must throb 'neath a burden of care.

IV.

My heart, that once beat with a rapid emotion,
Now droops like the vine in the winter's cold blast;
Its tendrils have withered, and weary its motion,
As the dirges, recoiling, sweep moaningly past.

V.

No more o'er the days of my childhood I'll ponder,
No more o'er those scenes which I once held so dear;
But, with grief my allotment, I'll drearily wander
Life's dark vale of gloom but a while—yet fore'er.

VI.

The sunbeams they come—but they melt not my sadness;
The bright buds they ope—but they mock with their bloom;
For, ah! the next time that they bloom in their gladness,
They'll bloom but to fade on my desolate tomb.

Ember Pictures.

I.

WHEN silence and darkness fling their chain
O’er life’s contemplative hour,
And our thoughts, in a dream-like mazy train,
Flit off to memory’s bower;
There’s a lingering breath of a faint perfume,
That in madness we love to cherish,
Like a flower in bloom on a sepulchral tomb,
That is hopelessly doomed to perish.

II.

We linger a while in this magic spell,
By the weirdness of thought enchanted,
Till ghostly phantoms rise and swell,
And the soul is vision-haunted.
But the charm enthralls us like a swoon;
In its sweetness we love to languish,
Though the shrivelled heart, like the waning moon,
Sinks down in bitter anguish.

III.

But when from the mind we deign to fling
This shadowy, death-like legion,
Why do our thoughts in ardor cling
To that ghastly peopled region?
There’s a spirit within—the chainless soul—
That points to the world of spirits;
And a destiny great, beyond mortal control,
That the soul itself inherits.

POEMS

A Legend of Dead Man's Lake.

"Dead Man's Lake is a lonely sheet of water lying in a desolate region of the Indian Peninsula, between Lake Huron and Georgian Bay. It is situated in a forest of dead pines and hemlocks, blighted by bush fires long before the memory of any living man, and this adds materially to the desolation of an already dreary region of swamp and rock. The following legend is based on tradition, and the Indians to this day believe that the body of the murdered chief lies with upturned face at the bottom of the lake."—Anon.

I.

Sad vale of death that moaneth dreary,
As if weighed 'neath a burden of care,
Even the sun shines cold, and his beams wax weary
In thy vacant shadowless air;
And the winds o'er the breast of thy lone lake sweeping,
Bear echoes from the tomb,
And thy desolate pines their death-watch keeping,
Ever whisper this tale of gloom:

II.

Long years ago, (so long that in telling,
A weary tale 'twould make)
An aged chief with his tribe was dwelling
On the shore of this desolate lake.
But life then bloomed here, and in beauty tender
The wild-flowers lifted their eyes,
Till it gleamed like a vale of magic splendor
Just fallen from the sunset skies.

III.

Here Wenonda dwelt in this vale of water,
Till the Spirit-voice should call,
And with him Alissa his dusky daughter—
Loveliest of maidens all.
And many a chieftain fain had woo'd her,—
From distant lands they came—
But in vain they sought, for none who viewed her
The light of her smile could claim.

IV.

None, none—save a kinsman long since cherished,
In life's bright morning scene,—
Now all but the memory had perished
Of what they once had been.
But Alissa oft in silence pondered
O'er the voice that spoke her fate,
And Oneydo where'er his footsteps wandered,
Bore a heart half love—half hate.

V.

For a Spirit-voice had come with its warning—
With words that deeply warn,—
"From the distant land of the rich-robed morning,
From the clime where the sun is born,
A chieftain shall come to this vale of water,
In a chieftain's state and pride,
To woo Wenonda's lovely daughter,
And bear her away as his bride."

VI.

Then sinking low, the voice grew dimmer
That fell on Wenonda's ear
Till it blent with the breeze and the wan star's shimmer
When the midnight hour grew near.
And the chieftain forgot that warning never,
And the maid and the lover knew
That all was o'er—yet in silence ever
Each heart to the other beat true.

VII.

Thus many moons arose, and waning,
Gave place to other moons,
Till one night o'er the Lake a lone star reigning
Swung low,—and then eftsoons
Came again that Voice through the dim air falling—
Well understood by one,
And Wenonda went at its mystic calling
To the land of the setting sun.

VIII.

Now, the waiting long and the anguish ended,
Came Oneydo o’er the tide,
And ere two moon’s again ascended
Claimed Alissa as his bride.—
Then each day sped on, as an angel golden
Had passed with beaming eyes,
While yet in whose rich-dyed robes are holden
The airs of paradise!

IX.

At length from the land of ocean currents,
Where mists were born of old,
From beyond the twin streams’[D] mighty torrents,
Came a stranger chieftain bold.
Of giant form, and with dark eye glancing,
And visage grim and sere,—
The somber plumes o’er his dun brow dancing,
Dropped shadows boding fear.

X.

To Oneydo he came as some dreaded token,
For which naught can win surcease;
Few deeds were done, few words were spoken,—
They smoked the pipe of peace.
But over that vale passed an unseen power
Three times with the setting sun,—
Then by that still lake at the midnight hour,
A murderous deed was done.

XI.

Uprose the sun in heaven's vault slowly—
All hid in mist, full soon
The stars shrank back, and, sweeping lowly,
Low dipped the horned moon.
But Alissa was gone—through the vale they sought her,
And the stranger chief was gone;—
False, false was the heart of Wenonda's daughter—
Both fled with the breaking dawn.

XII.

And the still, broad lake its secret keeping,
Lay hushed and mute for aye;
But in its depths in silence sleeping
Oneydo lowly lay.
None knew—but War's dark tempests lowered,
And broke with fiery mood,—
When the moon her light o'er the dim vale showered
Her beams were red as blood.

XIII.

Long waged the war with frightful slaughter,
Long and dismal was its reign,
Till dyed with blood was the vale of water,
And many a chief was slain.
Still Hatred reigned—her fury never
Abated till, came the day
When Wenonda's tribe had passed forever
From the haunts of men away.

XIV.

Now ages have passed, and the vale lies lonely—
Nor sign of life is there,
And the blasted pines are standing only
In the cold and lifeless air.
Yet oft when the midnight tempests lower
A phantom cloud low swings,
Then is heard o'er the Lake at that solemn hour
The flap of invisible wings.

XV.

The deer to his night-bound haunts, unheeding,
Should he pass by this desolate Lake,
But quickens his pace, and faster speeding
His phantom-flight doth take.
And the wild geese southward or northward hying,
If they pass o'er this vale in their flight,
Turn their course, till higher and higher flying,
They are lost to the searching sight.

XVI.

Well the red man knows the dismal story—
Knows where Oneydo lies;
He hath seen his corse all pale and gory
Looking helplessly up to the skies;
And to burning rage forever fated,
He is doomed to endless woe;
For there must he lie till Vengeance is sated,
Ere rest his spirit can know.

THE VIGIL.[E]

(A Romaunt of the late Rebellion in the U.S.A.)

I.

The Southern sun with his deep flood of light
Was slowly sinking, and the moated tide
Hung heavy o'er the dusky brow of night.
Along the gilded west rose far and wide
A range of hills; a vale on either side
Where rich magnolias grew, stretched far adown;
And in this hollow vale might be descried,
Where long the rose and hyacinth hath blown,
A modest cabin's roof with woodbine overgrown.

II.

Within this cabin, on a summer's eve,
Upon a couch a wounded soldier lay;
Propped up beside a window to relieve
His aching brow, he watched the dying day.
Anon his eyes would follow far away
The burnished dove disport on gilded wing,
Then nearer the gay oriole swoop at play;
And heard the while the merry mock-bird sing,
Till Slumber o'er his brow her leaden chain would fling.

III.

Then in fond dreams his Fancy oft would trace
His Northern home beside the winding stream,
A mother's fervent kiss and long embrace,
A sister's streaming tears, or the mild beam
Of fairer eyes, where love-lit thoughts would seem
To melt in tears. Oh, pictured vision bright!
Too soon to fade,—gone with the fleeting dream,
Like shooting stars that fade away in night,
And leave no trace behind to mark their sudden flight.

IV.

Oft would he start in wild delirium,
And grasp with frenzied hand the fancied blade,
As if he heard the regimental drum
Sounding to arms; for dire Fever preyed
Upon his young life's blood, and oft betrayed
That Death with dragon mouth stood yawning nigh,
Eager to seize his prey, nor would be stayed
By Art's firm hand or Pity's tear-dewed eye,
From his dread course, fell Demon of eternity.

V.

And as the fitful dream of parting life
Thus came and went, there watched beside
The dying soldier's couch of pain and strife
A gentle maid. In eager haste she tried,
As oft would rise and ebb life's surging tide,
To check the pulse, to soothe the heart's distress,
To minister the potion that would hide
Anguish and pain in deep forgetfulness;—
Irene performed the while such task of tenderness.

VI.

Hers was an aspect singularly mild,
With radiant brow deep-arched, obscurely clear,
And dark affrayed eyes, half-meek, half-wild,
That told the fount of pity welling near.
Twice gazed you on that face ere 'twould appear
That Time had all too early cast his pall
O'er the bright blooms that Youth and Beauty wear;
For mingled there hope, grief, doubt, fear, and all
That turn the human heart to tenderness—or gall.

VII.

The day declined, night's dusky mantle fell,
And evening's hush lay lightly o'er the vale;
Still watched Irene like hermit in his cell.
The bright moon rose, and twilight 'gan to fail
As the soft beams fell gently o'er the dale;
And still she watched with fixed, inquiring view
Upon the soldier's face upturned and pale,—
Alike his name, his lot, his fate, none knew,
Save by the badge he wore,—the Northern coat of blue.

VIII.

Scarce yestermorn it was since he had come,
Languid and faint from wounds and bitter woe,
Unto the portals of that Southern home,
Which, like the Southern heart, can ne'er forego
The sight of wretchedness, even in a foe,
A mortal foe, when hapless Pity calls
The generous heart unconsciously to show
The claims of mercy ere the mandate falls,
Or soothe the shriveled heart that suffering woe enthralls.

IX.

Still watched Irene; the bright moon higher rose,
And swung above the vale beneath a cloud.
"How like the orb of hope that rising glows
Fair, 'neath some sullen gloom that would enshroud
All that is bright in life!" Thus, half aloud,
The maiden spoke; then silence fell again,
And the soft light gleamed o'er her head, as bowed
She 'neath that aching, sinking sense of pain,
When hope hath sunk from view, and life itself is vain.

X.

Yet not for him unconscious slumbering there
The maiden mourned; far, far her thoughts were sped
With one who late had gone albeit to share
A soldier's lot, fame—or a grave instead;
Perchance 'twere both, his fate was still unread.
'Tis thus suspense ill brooks the heart's control:
She turned unto the casement half in dread,
As if her thoughts the night-winds could condole;
Her smothered words bespeak the anguish of her soul.

XI.

"O thou pale moon, arrayed in sombre hues,
Thou lookest o'er the earth in awe sublime,
Like some sad, pitying spirit when it views
The mortal clod that linked it once to time.
Oh, tell me, for 'tis said that in thy clime
Fate's mystic scroll is seen for e'er unrolled,
Tell me he lives. Ah, no!—I hear the chime
That speaks the death-note of the brave and bold;
Let fate take back her scroll, the tale must not be told."

XII.

Time measures woe; her reign he oft makes brief,
Oft lights the smile that decks the shining tear,
When Hope would fling aside the web of grief,
And over all would in full view appear.
'Twas thus Irene could dash aside all fear,
Could see returning from the unequal strife
Her best beloved, the beauteous South so dear
To both triumphant still, and honors rife
Bestrewn along the path to deck their future life.

XIII.

Away delusive dream!—the soldier wakes,
And round him casts a strange, bewildered eye,
Pale o'er his couch the struggling moonlight breaks;
Irene, half-startled, checks the smothering sigh,
Looks strangely round, nor scarce can wonder why
Slumber hath flown. Then turns she most in fright
To where the scarce-seen lamp is smouldering by,—
Flushed o'er the room a tide of yellow light,
As fled the darkened shades back to the wings of night.

XIV.

The soldier spoke, his accents feebly fell,
Irene drew near to catch what he might say.
"I have short time for what I fain would tell,"
He thus began, "this tenement of clay
Must soon dissolve—flit life and light away.
It is a tale to fright thy timid ear,
And yet a burden on my soul doth weigh,
That will not let it part. Nay, do not fear;
Though shadows cloud my mind, soon light will reappear."

XV.

"Southward we turned." He paused; then soon began,
"But three days since, albeit it may be more,
By chance we faced the foe, I slew a man;—
Oh, start not, gentle maid,—'twill soon be o'er.
He stood a sentry at the post which bore
His trust. We took the army by surprise;
'Twas night, and few there were; perchance three-score
Prisoners were made. Nay, hide not thus thine eyes;
Remorse can rend a heart that Pity would despise.

XVI.

"The skirmish o'er, by chance I found my way
To where the sentry fell, thinking 'twere best
If yet he lived. I had not meant to slay—
He turned on me—my sword pierced through his breast.
Oh! even at times a soldier's heart's oppressed
With pity, too. I saw him writhing still
In agony. The gaping wound undressed
Was pouring out his life. My heart grows chill
Even yet; O God! I thought how slight a thing can kill.

XVII.

"I stooped beside and strove to staunch the wound.
' 'Tis vain,' he said, 'a trust I'll give to thee.'
He bade me loose a packet which was bound
Beneath his cloak. 'I charge thee take,' said he,
'This token to the one who gave it me;
Her picture it contains. Tell her I died
While at the post of duty. Thou mayest see
Her name within.' He turned upon his side,
And slowly ebbed away life's dim-receding tide.

XVIII.

“I sought a furlough then, but ere ’twas given
Occasion thrust a battle in my way.
We fought, I know not how, but far were driven;
I, wounded, fell; then fled from me the ray
That reason beams. I knew no more till day
Dawned on me here; and now I hear the calling
Of voices strange; and moans, death-dying, lay
Their weight upon my soul, as deeply palling
The tired senses, come clogged shadows thickly falling.

XIX.

“Still let me cling to life; though hope be fled,
That mission I would fill for him whose hand
Gave me the charge; but even that hope is dead,
And from the glass of time the sliding sand
Is almost run. Oh, thou mayest understand
And yet fulfil my unavailing vow.
While yet I breathe on life’s uncertain strand,
To thee I give the sacred trust. Even now
Death’s touch is at my heart, his chill is on my brow.”

XX.

The faltering voice Irene no longer heard.
She saw the picture she had given to him
Her heart most yearned to reach. Then all appeared
Dark and confused; the while her senses swim,
The light burns blue, and waning visions dim
Flit o’er her mind; and voices distant seem
Like troubled waters moaning, phantoms grim,
Shades horrible; then reason’s flickering beam
Lit up—all, all as ’twere a wild, distempered dream.

XXI.

Oh! there are moments of our life a part,
When the soul's passion is too vast, too deep
For Sorrow's shafts to pierce the quivering heart;
Feeling is numbed in a half-conscious sleep,
In aching weariness the senses steep,
And a cold chill like death-breath freezes o'er
The fount of tears, and will not let one weep.
Then pent within the spirit's inmost core
The fire burns but consumes not, burning evermore.

XXII.

Reason returns again, but ever gone
Are hope and happiness,—withered the bloom,
The last flower plucked, but still the stalk lives on,
A living death; the lone sepulchral tomb
Less hopeless is.—Thus fell the blasting doom
Upon Irene. Rayless the gathering night
Which settled o'er her soul engulfed in gloom:
She turned away like one whose vacant sight
All things can dimly see, yet naught can see aright.

XXIII.

Full well she knew the hand that dealt her doom
Lay there outstretched in pleading helplessness;
Should she withhold the potion, death would come
Outreaching time, dark thoughts; but who could guess
If e'er they broke upon her soul's distress?
The night was long, but longer still even then
The night that wrapped her life. Deep shades depress
Her very thoughts in sighs. Nor tongue, nor pen,
Alas! hath Grief to tell that tale of woe again.

XXIV.

Long, long the night; its hours crept slowly by,
Each burdened by the weary weight of years;—
The soldier slept, but o'er the closing eye
Of mortal life fell that deep gloom which wears
The mask of death in Life's dim vale of tears:
He slept; but ere the Dawn in mantle gray,
Who in the east her purple dome uprears
Each morn, had brought to man another day,
Cold in the embrace of death the soldier slept for aye.

XXV.

All through the long, long night Irene alone
Her vigil kept, and oft she strove in vain,
Ere the slow-ebbing tide of life had gone,
With gentle touch to chase away dull Pain
Which o'er the soldier's brow his heavy chain
Had thrown. But, oh! it seemed as though
The weight of three-score years of Sorrow's reign
Had fallen upon her life;—that night of woe,
Had turned her raven hair white as the wintry snow!

A Fable in Two Cantos.

PRELUDE.

LIFE is a riddle, deep, majestic, grand,
For all to solve, but few to understand;
'Tis a strange world, some say with stoic bliss,
And straightway vow this globe hath gone amiss;
While some presume and some soliloquise,
"There's less in wisdom than in seeming wise;"
"Silence is golden," spake of old the sage,
The rule holds good in our distempered age;
Then silence keep and learn from meaner things,
From which full many a goodly lesson springs.
Grasp not the shadow that first meets your eyes,
For somewhere near the substance always lies;
A simple story serves to tell the fate
Of many a brain-dashed, vaunting shallow pate.

CANTO I.

A frog dwelt once upon a time
Far up within the northern clime,
’Twas pleasant sure, when Summer threw
O’er wood and lake and mountain blue,
Her fairy mantle; then the frog,
Exulting loud in many a bog,
Sang siren songs in brake and bush,
Such as would fairly put to blush,
Or fill, good faith, with envious rage
The modern artist of the stage;
And well he might, the pesky elf
Could even understand himself;
And as his voice still louder rang,
He understood the words he sang;
He sang, and leaping sang so clear,
The very breezes paused to hear;
He sang till even the Echoes tired,
To bear his songs no more aspired.
But why dilate upon this song,
Or why a tedious tale prolong?
When Winter raised his elfin wand,
The frog retired to his pond;
His voice was hushed, the winds that kissed
The placid lake his ditties missed,
Straight in a tempest rage they flew,
And colder, wilder, louder blew,
Till Summer could no more endure,
And fled to southern climes secure.
But when cold Winter, tired grown,
Would drop his wand a moment down,
That self-same instant you might hear
The frog’s shrill voice pipe loud and clear.
The Winds delighted sank again,
And gently swept the barren plain;
And Summer, stirred by some strange force,

Straight to the Northland took her course.

CANTO II.

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